



## Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor Office of International Labor Affairs

# Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

## Worker Rights in Focus: Freedom of Association

**F**reedom of association is an internationally recognized worker right that contributes to respect for other rights at work and is a cornerstone of democratic representation and good governance. Workers should have the right to freely form and join organizations of their choosing, without government or outside interference. Worker organizations also should be allowed to strike. Freedom of association allows workers to come together to collectively express, promote, and protect common interests, and when promoted effectively, has positive spillover effects for political inclusion, and it can enhance a country's competitiveness, productivity, and equitable distribution of the gains of trade.

### Freedom of Association at Work

Freedom of association enables workers to have a voice to advance their rights in the workplace. With some exceptions, all workers, including foreign and migrant workers, should be able to have the right to freely join and form a union. Common problems in this area include:

- Restricting workers from forming and/or joining independent unions of their choice;
- Requiring a single trade union confederation;
- Controlling or dictating a union's election process;
- Imposing lengthy and cumbersome union registration requirements;
- Restricting or banning workers' organizations' ability to strike;
- Retaliation against workers for union activity;
- Using physical violence or worker intimidation; and
- Excessively broad definition of sectors that are exempted from the right to strike.

### Highlights from the 2010 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices

The Country Reports on Human Rights Practices (HRR) address the extent to which individual countries respect human rights and worker rights. The 2010 HRR highlighted problematic practices regarding the freedom of association in numerous countries, including the following instances:

- In Saudi Arabia, the labor code did not address the right of workers to form and join independent unions, and workers were not allowed to strike;
- Government officials restricted Chinese workers to membership in a single government trade federation and prohibited free and open elections of union leaders;
- Workers' ability to strike in Zimbabwe was severely limited by onerous pre-strike requirements and completely prohibited for managers;
- Yellow unions, or pro-management, were used in Mexico to prevent workers' from forming legitimate and representative unions;
- Belarusian officials denied registration to some unions and continued efforts to gain control of existing ones;
- Violence and discrimination against union members discouraged workers from joining and engaging in union activities in Colombia; and
- Foreign workers, who comprised the majority of the workforce in Jordan's qualified export zones, were prohibited from striking.

All 2010 Human Rights Reports are available at:  
<http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2010/index.htm>.

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